

"Thanks for all of the excellent arrangements that you and the staff of PCA made for the meetings of the Executive Committee and the General Assembly... I thought the meetings went extremely well and I am sure this was a reflection of all the hard work that you and your staff had put into their organisation."

—excerpt from a letter from Graham Talbot, chairman of the European co-operation for Accreditation, to Eugeniusz W. Roguski, director of the Polish Centre for Accreditation (PCA)

Accreditation Experts Flock to Warsaw

An organization called the European co-operation for Accreditation held its 28th General Assembly in Warsaw Nov. 23-24 to sum up its policies and map out future trajectories.

The European co-operation for Accreditation (EA) is a nonprofit association established in 1997 that aims to "provide an effective accreditation infrastructure" in Europe. Registered in the Netherlands, the EA forms a network of nationally recognized accreditation bodies across Europe. At the moment, it brings together 33 organizations representing various EU and EFTA member countries.

The association says it works to define, harmonize and build consistency in accreditation as a service in Europe, by ensuring common interpretation of the standards used by its members. This includes the accreditation of testing and calibration laboratories and of certification and inspection bodies.

Under a regulation approved by the European Parliament in 2008 and in effect since January 2010, the EA is the body recognized to provide the official accreditation infrastructure within Europe.

The association's Warsaw GA, which was hosted by the Polish Centre for Accreditation (PCA), attracted EA mem-

bers as well as officials from the European Commission and other institutions. Meeting participants discussed EA policies, took decisions on admitting new members, and tackled issues such as work with other organizations, in addition to guidelines for the organization's development.



■ Graham Talbot, chairman of the European co-operation for Accreditation:

The Warsaw General Assembly aimed "to get the members, who are the national accreditation bodies from each of the member states, together, in order to be able to discuss activities and strategies for the future in terms of supporting the needs of the European marketplace within accreditation."

"The national accreditation bodies are appointed formally within the member states to be the pinnacle of the conformity assessment... What that means is, each national accreditation body is there to ensure that those bodies that are providing evaluation services to society, to the economy, to trade, to business and to services, are all operating correctly. So the national accreditation body ensures that what is being delivered in terms of test reports or certificates regarding services are actually underpinning the needs of society at large within each of the member states. Accreditation is there to support trade, to facilitate trade, to ensure that society is protected in terms of safe products and services that are provided within each of the member states."

Amid the latest crisis in the euro zone, "whatever happens in terms of solutions in Europe, trade is going to be an important aspect of those solutions. So increasing trade and having free trade amongst the member states and indeed between Europe and the rest of the world is very, very important."

"Accreditation... provides the mechanisms for products and services to be moved across borders without further inspection, without further certification. And therefore it's a trade facilitator; it underpins the free movement of trade, it reduces barriers to trade and technical barriers to trade, and therefore I see it as a part of that solution that will help Europe to trade itself out of the difficulties that exist at the moment, not only within Europe but also within the overall global infrastructure. So I see accreditation as being a very important part of the overall solution."

(from a Polish Radio 1 interview with Talbot)



Nothing But the Truth

Eugeniusz W. Roguski, director of the Polish Centre for Accreditation (PCA), and Lucyna Olborska, PCA's deputy director for Accreditation, talk to Andrzej Jonas.



Eugeniusz W. Roguski, Lucyna Olborska, and Andrzej Jonas

■ The Polish Centre for Accreditation is a relatively new institution. When was it established, what is its status and in what areas does it operate?

Eugeniusz W. Roguski: The Polish Centre for Accreditation was established on Jan. 1, 2001 in order to meet EU requirements under which each member state should have an independent body to inspect and evaluate the work of bodies which deal with conformity assessment. The system of conformity assessment aims to guarantee high product quality and safety standards as regards goods and services around us. All of those are verified, checked and tested by a network of testing laboratories and certification bodies. The labs and certification bodies issue documents which, for example, allow for a given commodity to be put on the market, or permit people to work in a given environment. In other words, they check whether a product is safe and complies with specific requirements. If that is the case, the appropriate certificate is granted. Before any of that can happen, Poland's 1,500 labs, inspection and certification bodies, which include both public and private institutions, need to obtain accreditation from the Polish Centre for Accreditation, that is, secure confirmation of their ability to perform a specified range of tasks.

To a customer, our accreditation certificate is like a license granted for four years, over which time we monitor the handling of tasks which the customer was authorized to perform. We have 70 full-time and 500 freelance workers, who conduct an average of eight assessments a day. Whenever an irregularity is found, the inspected body is given some time to make the necessary amendments. If there still is no improvement afterwards, we suspend the accreditation.

I must add that our assessors are the *creme de la creme* and specialize in all possible areas.

■ Who oversees the Polish Centre for Accreditation and in what way is its work assessed?

Lucyna Olborska: The Polish Centre for Accreditation has the status of a state institution and is overseen by the economy minister. Under EU legal regulations, we are a public authority, even though technically we are not. We are an exception in the economic system, because while we carry out government tasks, we do not get a single penny from public finances. In fact, the opposite is the case and we have to transfer a third of our profits to the state budget. Consequently, we cost taxpayers nothing and we support ourselves wholly from the funds we obtain for our assessments and training courses.

EU regulations prohibit competition on the market for accreditation, which explains why accreditation bodies have undergone a consolidation process. Each member state can only have one such institution and so the Polish Centre for Accreditation is the only accreditation body in Poland.

Just because we have a monopoly on accreditation does not mean there is no one to oversee us. Every four years, we undergo evaluation—mutual assessment—by other European bodies, because in this system, all European bodies associated in the European cooperation for Accreditation (EA) evaluate one another. A group of evaluators from abroad assesses whether we work properly. Then, they grant us permission to continue the full scope of our operations or pursue only some accreditation fields. The system works identically on both the national and international levels.

■ Does this mean that the main customers of the Polish Centre for Accreditation are certification bodies and laboratories?

E.W.R.: Yes indeed. In order to ensure the high quality and safety of products and services, we accredit testing and calibration labs, certification and inspection bodies as well as verifiers. Our customers include the laboratories of almost all state inspection authorities, including sanitary and veterinarian inspection, technical supervision and environmental protection. To them, our accreditation documents provide an objective confirmation that they meet international standards. Our decisions are recognized around the world.

■ Is accreditation a mandatory process for your customers?

L.O.: Some of our customers have to hold a certificate while others can if they want to, because the accreditation system is divided in two areas, voluntary and mandatory. Certificates are required for a part of products and services before these can be put on the market. This stems from national regulations and the government is the body to regulate mandatory accreditation. For example, the government decides that all environmental protection laboratories need to be accredited by the Polish Centre for Accreditation and, consequently, it is our formal duty to evaluate them. The situation is similar with other bodies which by law are subject to accreditation.

The other group, one that keeps growing, is voluntary accreditation. This is the world's most popular system where consumers are the "regulating body." Consumers are now the ones who say: "I'm not buying a product of unknown origin, I want to know if it's good and safe, better than others." In this way, consumers push producers to obtain an appropriate document. Certificates from the Polish Centre for Accreditation are mainly sought after by institutions and companies that want to strengthen their market competitiveness. Suffice it to say that every Polish product that crosses the Polish border needs to have a conformity certificate complete with accreditation.

■ Has the Polish Centre for Accreditation been subject to any outside pressure in its work?

E.W.R.: Those who, like us, evaluate the work of others have to remain completely independent of any pressure. As a "third party," we are impartial and yield to no structural or financial pressure from either customers or consumers. I have already said we are no financial burden to the state and, in fact, we still manage to make some money. We stick by the principle that objective truth underlies each decision by the Polish Centre for Accreditation. This is the only guideline for us to grant or deny accreditation, that is, confirm that somebody has certain qualifications or not. During my three years as director of the Polish Centre for Accreditation, I have not seen the slightest attempt at exerting pressure on our institution.

A 20-strong Accreditation Council appointed by the economy minister and operating out of the Polish Centre for Accreditation gives out an opinion on the directions of our work. Its members represent all interested parties, including the ministries we work for, our customers and their customers, including consumer associations, employer associations, academic and scientific circles. This is an additional guarantee that we are fully impartial in our decisions. ■